

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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Reflections on Four Hundred Years of Baptist History

Pamela R. Durso

Near the end of his book *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, Thomas Helwys declared, "Let none . . . 'despise the day of small things' (Zechariah 4:10)."¹ Helwys knew about "small things," for he pastored a church of less than fifteen members. And even though he warned against despising "small things," he never could have imagined while he wasted away in Newgate Prison that he had helped start a religious movement that would eventually take root on every inhabited continent on earth. While I can only speculate as to what Helwys might say if given the opportunity to reflect on Baptist life four hundred years later, I can offer a few of my own reflections as we finish out this year of celebration.

Baptists began as a minority movement. In the early years in England and then in the American colonies, Baptists were small in numbers, scattered in location, and often lone voices against an established state church. Even today, in many nations around the world, Baptists continue as a minority movement. Yet, our history tells us that we as Baptists have often been at our best in times and places when we have not been in the majority. Baptist voices have been louder, more prophetic, and more persistent when we have been in a dissenting, minority role.

Baptists have ardently struggled for religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Early Baptists had no political power to assist in fulfilling their mission, nor did they ask for any help from the government. They did, however, demand that the government allow them and other minority groups to practice their faith according to the dictates of their consciences. Facing oppression, discrimination, and persecution, Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took on established churches and governments, and tirelessly worked for religious freedom for all people. Baptists were well-known and well-despised defenders of freedom and champions of religious liberty. Today, we as Baptists are at our best when we hold fast to the religious freedom tradition of our Baptist fathers and mothers and when we work hard to make such freedom a reality for all people throughout the world.

Baptists have typically been avid church planters. From the first Baptist church founded by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in Amsterdam, Baptists have focused much energy in organizing and growing churches. Early Baptists took their faith with them as they moved into the American colonies and later into all other parts of the world. As they settled in new places, they held worship services and eventually founded new churches. We Baptists have also

throughout our history formed many new churches because of divisions, conflicts, and church splits. We are avid church planters, planting healthy new churches but sometimes creating new churches out of dysfunction and disagreement. At our best, we as Baptists need to turn our attention to planting new, healthy churches in the many places in our world that have little access to the gospel message.

Baptists began as a diverse group. From the 1630s, Baptist life has been characterized by theological diversity. General and Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist churches both were in existence within thirty years after the first Baptist church was organized. Over the years, diversity has only increased to include gender and racial diversity. In 2009, we as Baptists hold numerous theological beliefs, worship in a variety styles, and include numerous racial and cultural groups. Our diversity has often been the cause of our infighting, but perhaps our diversity should instead be celebrated as what has kept Baptist conversations going, kept us growing, and helped us learn to live as the body of Christ.

On this the eve of our 401st year, we as Baptists are reminded that we hold in common a long, diverse, and complicated history. Our history is often inspiring, sometimes discouraging, but never boring. My hope as we move into the unknown and sometimes intimidating Baptist future is that we can look back together and learn from our shared past.

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¹Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612)*, ed. Richard Groves, Classics of Religious Liberty, vol. 1 (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 154.